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John and Lois Zimmerman
400 E. Wanda Lane
Fairbury, IL 61739

A FAMILY HARDWARE STORE

Joseph and Hermina Zimmerman were the parents of ten children. John is third from the youngest of the children. There are four older brothers, three older sisters, and two younger brothers.

Joseph supported his family by working in the hardware department of Walton Bros. store in Fairbury, Illinois.

After a family outing to Brookfield Zoo in Chicago, Joseph decided he was going to start a hardware store of his own.

He opened Zimmerman Hardware on March 1, 1941, in the building that is now occupied by Tri-County Carpets. The store carried a full line of hardware, including washing machines, refrigerators, stoves, paint, etc. The store was also the dealer for Shellane Bottle Gas.

John's first jobs at the store were to carry coal to heat the building, carry out ashes, sweep the floor, and put merchandise away.

John also delivered 100 pound tanks of gas to customers. Since he was only twelve and a half years old, someone else was needed to drive the truck. This was often his sister, Ruth store employee Liz Mehrings.

John's brother Lloyd worked in the store for awhile, until he went into service. Store hours were 7:30 a.m. until 5:30 p.m. The store was open until 10:00 p.m. on Saturday.

During John's sophomore year at school, John would open the store in the morning and Joseph (Pop) would come in at eight o'clock to work and John would go to school. John also had what were called floating periods at school when he would be able to come up to work while Pop went to lunch and other times during the day. He also came in early after school and worked until closing.

At the end of John's sophomore year, Pop told him he would have to have full-time help or close the store. John

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chose to quit school and work at the store.

These were World War II years and John installed many gas stoves and refrigerators to the farmers as many did not have electricity. He delivered all of the bottle gas which grew to 3900 tanks a year.

Spring brought gas brooder season for baby chicks. Many brooders were installed. John remembers going home to take a bath after crawling under a brooder as he would be covered in chicken lice.

Life wasn't all work at the store though, for John would sometimes ride his bike to Gibson City to visit his sister, Helen and family.

Sometimes John and a friend would borrow a couple of bikes at the store on a Sunday and ride to Forrest for the day. When they came back they would carefully replace the bikes for sale.

There were not many cars or gas to drive if you had one, so John and his friends would hitchhike to Chatsworth on Saturday nights to the dance hall which was the main entertainment for the area. This meant they would also need a ride back to Fairbury. John recalls that one night it was cold and snowing, and it was a long time before they got a ride home.

There were also prize drawings at the dance hall and one of John's friends won a new Hudson automobile. The friend took his girlfriend out one night in his new car and parked in a farmer's lane by a field. The farmer saw the car and thought it was robbers, got out his shotgun and fired at the car as it was leaving. Needless to say, the back of the car was full of buckshot.

Chore Boy Milkers became popular for the farmers during the war years as you could milk two cows at a time. Pop and John would go out evenings and give demonstrations and the farmer would usually buy the milking machine.

Stoker furnaces were also very popular during the war years. They consisted of a hopper on the outside of the furnace with an auger to put coal in when the furnace called for heat. A special unit went inside the furnace to hold the coal and had to be cememted in place. John said he was small enough to get inside the furnace and cement around the unit.

The war came to an end and Lloyd came back to work in

the store. John still did most of the deliveries and the installations. He was being paid thirty five cents an hour and wanted a raise and Pop said, "No". John quit and went to work for his brother, Gene who was a mason and he earned a dollar an hour that summer.

At the end of the summer, Pop came and talked to John and told him he wanted to buy a bigger store building and include furniture and carpet in it and wanted John to come back to work and he would pay him a dollar an hour. John came back to the store.

The new store opened in 1951 in the former Mapel Bros. building. It had a balcony for furniture as well as a huge 3rd floor for storage and furniture display.

In 1952 John married Lois Smith from El Paso. Making forty dollars a week, John asked for a raise and his pay was increased to forty five dollars a week.

Lois started working part-time at the store. She had worked at a dime store in El Paso before their marriage.

Pop liked to tell his friends about his new daughter-in-law. Quite often they would laugh and speak in German, which upset Lois.

John told Lois the next time it happened to look at Pop and say, "Bassa Booba" (which meant bad boy).

The next Saturday night the cure was given. After saying, "Bassa Booba" to Pop, both Pop and his friend had red faces and nothing else to say.

Lois remembers baking cookies to demonstrate gas stoves at the store. Salesmen were at the store to tell about the stoves.

It was in the winter and lots of farmers were in town visiting. They were drinking coffee and eating cookies as fast as Lois could bake them.

Pop was always great on free gift wrapping. Late one Saturday evening a couple came in and bought, what was called a pull up occasional chair for a living room. They wanted it gift wrapped for a wedding the next day. Lois got to wrap it, but it certainly wasn't the neatest looking package.

Pop sold wallpaper , but none of the employees liked it because it was hard to get to in a long hall off of the balcony

with a drop ceiling for the main floor next to it.

One day Pop sent a lady up to look at wall paper. The lady had a child with her and set him on the drop ceiling to be out of the way.

The next thing heard was a scream downstairs, where a child was hanging by his armpits through the ceiling. John ran upstairs and rescued the child and told Pop that this was it and they were getting rid of the wallpaper.

Pop said that anyone that got rid of the wallpaper would be fired. However, the next time Pop went to Chicago on a buying trip, all of the employees went up and helped carry out the wallpaper and take it to the dump. None were fired, as it would meaning firing all the employees.

In April of 1954, Pop died unexpectedly on his way to work. John was working on a chicken brooder at Cropsey when a call came for him to go back to Fairbury at once.

Lois was expecting their first child and John thought that something must be wrong with her,and hurried back to Fairbury and learned about Pop.

John and Lloyd continued to run the store, which was left to the ten children.

Robert, a younger brother came to work in the store after, he got out of the Navy.

Ralph, the oldest of the family came to work in the store after selling his gas station.

In the 60's when natural gas came to Fairbury, many of the appliances, water heaters, etc. were discontinued. Very little bottle gas was sold.

In the early 80's furniture and carpet was discontinued and more small appliances, gifts and housewares added.

Christmas was a busy time with stores open every night except Sunday. Many toys, gift items, and decorations were added at this time of year.

John and Lois have five children. The two boys occasionally helped with deliveries, etc. at the store. All three girls worked part time during their school years at the store. Lois helped occasionally on Saturday or at Christmas time.

Retirement years were nearing and there was discussion of what would happen to the store.

As it happened, a local person was interested and the ZIMMERMAN TRUE VALUE HARDWARE store was sold in November 1992, after serving the community of Fairbury for 51 years.